DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 455 540 CS 217 671

AUTHOR Petto, Christine M.
TITLE It Was Easier When I Was a Tutor.
PUB DATE 2001-05-00
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the National Writing Across the Curriculum Conference (5th, Bloomington, IN, May 31-June 2, 2001).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Comparative Analysis; *Content Area Writing; Higher Education; History Instruction; *Teacher Role; *Tutoring; *Tutors; *Writing Teachers
IDENTIFIERS *Tutor Role; *Writing Intensive Courses

ABSTRACT

A European history professor who was once a discipline-specific writing tutor finds that she is now more actively involved in "teaching" writing to non-majors and majors. Her responsibilities as a discipline-specific tutor entailed some possible steps: upon beginning a tutorial session, she might only brainstorm with the student various ways to satisfy the assignment; after settling on the topic, student and tutor would outline or layout the plan for the paper; and addressed were both higher-level (macro) concerns and lower-level (micro/sentence-level) concerns. Ten years later the challenges for the professor of tutoring/teaching writing are similar but complicated by three issues she did not face as a tutor: (1) bureaucratic requirements for "separate" intensive writing courses and the problems that "segregation" might cause for student conceptions of writing; (2) the number of students filling four classes all with writing requirements though not labeled "intensive"; and (3) the challenge of teaching writing while conveying much content material. Satisfying the Board which approves intensive writing courses is relatively easy by way of a detailed syllabus, examples of clear writing assignments, and writing guidelines for the course. The greater challenge for a Writing Program is to convince administrators, faculty, and students that writing is an integral part in the learning process for all fields and then implement a program that serves both faculty and students. To create a culture of writing in her classes, the professor designs writing assignments to meet time constraints. She also chooses a historical problem or question for the students to grapple with in the way that a professional historian would. (NKA)

ED 455 540

# It Was Easier When I Was a Tutor.

by Christine M. Petto

Paper presented at the National Writing Across the Curriculum Conference (5th, Bloomington, IN, May 31-June 2, 2001).

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
C. M. Petto
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC).

CS 217 671

**IT WAS EASIER WHEN I WAS A TUTOR**

About ten years ago, I began as a discipline-specific tutor at Indiana University's Writing Tutorial Services (or WTS). At the time as a graduate student finishing course work and casting about for a dissertation topic, I was so paranoid about my own writing that I wondered how I could possibly assist any students in their writing. Much to my surprise, I could relate to their anxieties about writing and found it easy (sometimes) to guide them through the process. Now, as a professor of European history, still with some "angst" regarding my own writing, I am more actively involved in "teaching" writing to non-majors and majors.

As I sat down to write about my current experiences, I reflected on what I had learned as a tutor, and why "it was easier when I was a tutor." My tutorial responsibilities as a discipline-specific tutor entailed five possible steps. First, upon beginning a tutorial session, I might only brainstorm with the student the various ways to satisfy the assignment. For me, this initial step emphasized that assignment sheets from the professor/instructor were very helpful in order not to have to rely on the student's interpretation of what the professor said in class. (Of course, sometimes there is the problem of a misinterpretation of the written assignment.) Second, after settling on the topic and a possible thesis, the student and I would outline or layout the plan for the paper. Such a step reminded the student that his/her paper should have a plan and not merely fall from MIND to FINGERTIPS to COMPUTER SCREEN and PRESTO—a paper! Of course, depending on the preparations done by the student or during a session of his/her class, steps one and two may have been as far as we got in one tutoring session.

In many cases, however, the session actually began with step three, i.e., reading a draft of the paper for various purposes. The session could be very short if the paper did not meet the requirements of the assignment. For example, if a professor asked students to analyze a particular dramatic piece, document, or article, and the draft only provided a summary of the piece, then the session might revolve only around how to "recreate" the summary into an analytical piece. Let's assume, however, that the draft comes close enough to meeting the requirements of the assignment.

Step three, addresses both higher-level (or macro) concerns and lower-level (or micro/sentence-level) concerns. At the macro-level the tutor, looks for an appropriate or workable thesis, evidence or support for the thesis, and a clear organization or a paper that follows its plan. At the same time the tutor reads for lower-level concern, e.g., grammatical problems, misspellings, or punctuation errors. Remember, however, and this is the "problematic issue" for some professors and some students, neither a tutor nor a professor is an editor!!! WTS was not about "scrubbing up" papers before turning them in for a grade. Perhaps all who tutor or teach writing to whatever degree must cope with this misconception either by colleagues or by their own students when it comes to revisions. I'll come back to this "editor-in-waiting" issue later.

Typically (if I can even use that term), step three—the actual reading of the draft—is hopefully only 1/3 of the session, and step four, the debriefing, takes up most of the time and includes the most important instructional aspects during which the student and the tutor go over both the macro- and micro-level concerns of the paper. Whether a tutor or a professor, it is often best to start with something positive, such as "great title," "good opening paragraph," or "I love the font,"—something! Then, perhaps, move on to

the "easily fixable" concerns, such as "don't forget to proofread, for example Ptolemy has a 'p' at the beginning," or "be careful of your subject-verb agreements," "watch out for the use of passive voice or the overuse of the verb 'to be'," or "take a look at this sentence with the 'and,' do you need a comma here?" A tutor might even photocopy a page or two from a writing handbook to help a student identify a specific comma usage or the proper citation style for his/her paper. These "micro" or sentence-level concerns can certainly mar a paper, but it is the "macro" or "paper-level" concerns that often indicate whether a student has digested the content material.

For example, does the paper have a thesis at the beginning or is it a murder mystery that requires the reader to wait until the end to find out that the "butler did it." The solution may be as simple as moving (with some rewriting) parts of the conclusion to the introduction. Does the paper reflect a clear organization in its paragraph development and do the paragraphs have a clear internal structure as well? Does the paper reflect the plan presented in the introduction? Finally, does the paper demonstrate the author's understanding of the material presented? Step four usually ends with two questions—1) tutor says to the student: "Do you have any questions? And 2) tutor says to the student: "What is your plan of attack for the revisions?" If the student does not have a clear sense of a plan or is now crying hysterically, then the tutor might write a brief outline of steps to follow, and get a tissue…. Sometimes, the session becomes a sad/harsh reality check for the student. The time remaining before the due date is not enough, but still the student should leave the session with some reasonable plan that does not include running away to join the circus. Perhaps a suggestion for meeting with the professor is in order…

The subsequent conversation between professor and student at this stage may be too late in terms of a "graded" assignment, but sometimes this conversation is helped by the fact that the course was "linked" in some way with WTS. As a discipline-specific tutor, I was linked with some Arts & Sciences courses whose professors chose to arrange a more formal set up with WTS. These courses included any number of history classes, a few sociology classes, a criminal justice class, a geography class, a geology class and a quantum physics class. I would meet with the professor and talk about the kinds of assignments (and even receive copies) required for the class, e.g., bibliographic essays, case studies, individual and groups papers with various parts including summary reports, data analysis, historiography, etc. Also, I would talk to the professor regarding his/her concerns about student writing or feedback on papers. Often, I visited the class for a 5-minute introduction to the Writing Tutorial Services and handed out the "famous" yellow bookmarks! Meeting with the professor seemed a bit scary at first, but looking back all the professors treated me nearly as a "colleague." We were both "in the writing trenches" and more than just with our "classes." I knew that one day I would be where they were…. And now, I am…

I am the professor that perhaps writes the convoluted or incomprehensible assignment or worse, the professor that gives no assignment sheet at all. Now, ten years later, the challenges of tutoring/teaching writing are similar but complicated by three issues that I did not face as a tutor 1) bureaucratic requirements for "separate" intensive writing courses and the problems that that "segregation" might cause for student conceptions of writing, 2) the number of students (which can total 150 or more) filling four classes all with writing requirements though not labeled "intensive," and 3) the

challenge of teaching writing while conveying a great deal of content material. I do not believe that these challenges are unique to my situation.

First, satisfying the Board (or the bureaucracy), which approves intensive writing courses, is annoying but relatively easy by way of a detailed syllabus, examples of clear writing assignments, and writing guidelines for the course. Ideally, all courses should "create a culture of writing" to the degree or format appropriate to their respective fields. Practically, however, some universities create "special" writing courses, i.e., intensive writing courses, in which the expectation is that students will be trained to write in their field of study. This arrangement becomes problematic when students learn that "writing courses" in one department are less "taxing" than in another and both satisfy the university requirement. Which course would you take? I would suggest that this segregation of writing helps to propagate the attitude that writing is a "special" task and not necessarily an integral part of learning. For example, students have suggested to me, a history professor, that my "grammar demands" border on those of an English professor and are therefore unreasonable for a mere "history" class. From my standpoint, I am not an "editor-in-waiting," and my responsibility is neither to ignore grammatical problems nor to "scrub clean" student papers for revision purposes. Writing should not be isolated to "special" classes so that students think that 20-25 pages of writing are grounds for an intensive writing course. The greater challenge for a Writing Program is to convince administrators, faculty, and students that writing is an integral part in the learning process for all fields and at all levels of study and then implement a Program that serves both the faculty and the students.

Second, in order to cope with the numbers and to create a culture of writing in all my classes, I design writing assignments to meet the time constraints. For example, in any undergraduate survey, five-minute free (or directed) writing assignments serve the dual goal of encouraging students to express their knowledge through writing and to reveal a level of comfort with content. Longer essay exams (in-class or take home) or paper assignments allow students to use these five-minute writings as building blocks for longer thesis-driven essays. No matter the class or the level, writing is an integral part of learning and can precede (or succeed) a class discussion, demonstrate student knowledge or clarify student lack of comprehension. Sometimes a "free-write" can be not about "what do you know," but "what do you not understand" or "what do you want clarified." Since the student numbers will not really change from semester to semester, the types of assignments and the amount of feedback must be in harmony with the time constraints. I will address a few more examples in a moment.

Third, as a professor of history and history of science, when I teach I do not "create" a content module in order to give students an excuse to write an assignment, rather as I have done in all my courses, I choose a historical problem or question for the students to grapple with in the way that a professional historian would. Writing, like oral communication or discussion, is merely one of the vehicles by which a student demonstrates his/her comprehension, but unlike the "free-flowing" discussion, the "rules of writing" seem much more stringent to students. The pressures on the instructor are both how to convey these rules as a benefit to the learning process and how to cover the topic or period of time and "teach writing." I prefer to focus less explicitly on "teaching

writing" and focus instead on analytical thinking, presentation of arguments, and choice and organization of evidence.

As I see it, both my students and I have at least four jobs/roles in the classroom: advisors, teachers, tutors, and students. (I am not sure these roles are distinct from one another.) Like many professors, I teach writing in all my courses from an undergraduate survey, Western Civilization I, covering 5000 years to a graduate class covering the French Revolution. In my role as the "tutor" I do all things I did at WTS, but perhaps some of the steps go on in the classroom where I play both the teacher and student role. For example, for the first two Western Civilization essays—one on geography and culture in Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia and the other on the ideal of *demokratia* in Classical Athens—my students and I brainstorm. Brainstorming helps create a plan for the paper and perhaps a thesis. In addition, this exercise allows the class to review "the history" of say Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia (or fifth-century Athens). Finally, this "innocent" opening stage in the writing process re-emphasizes the lesson of how to read primary sources, what a primary source is, and how to use it as evidence.

Still, however, before I ever get to read the paper (step three in the tutorial process), I try to teach my students how to become their own reviewer by implementing a "modified" peer review. In Western Civilization, students trade papers, and I require that they look for and identify three things: 1) the author's thesis/argument, 2) the "plan" of the paper, and after choosing one "body" paragraph and 3) the topic sentence and the use of evidence (i.e. primary sources). The purpose of this review is for students to see how their classmates dealt with the same assignment and hopefully to learn from their peers. For me, I get to see if my students can identify these three elements. This modified peer

review takes place 5-10 minutes before the students turn in their papers. Sometimes, I do not require a written essay, but an outline and in this form there is no peer review, rather I require the students to identify two elements in their own papers 1) their thesis and 2) key passages from the primary sources that they are using for evidence.

In my upper division classes (whether writing intensive or not), I use a "standard" peer review, but I do not inform the students ahead of time that the review will take place. (I have found that if students don't think they will have to turn in their paper, they do not bring a "true" final draft.) Students arrive with the final draft of their paper. I ask them to trade with a classmate (a different one each time) and to identify the same three elements, but this time, students have the opportunity to discuss the changes they would make with their classmates, and then together as a class. We might devote an entire class period to this peer review process and the debriefing. The class then becomes a large group tutorial session. (Note, that while the session can be very useful such a time commitment can challenge the scheduling constraints for content coverage.) Students are then allowed to keep their papers for one more class period in order to make the revisions they want. I used the peer review twice in a class with five writing assignments. In my Historical Methods class, the students "discovered" that "final" drafts aren't necessarily final. I have encouraged them to be their own peer reviewer, but this class is not a writing intensive class.

In fact, I find it best just to teach as I would and not get "too hung up on" "writing intensive labels." What is good for my students? Understanding historical arguments, developing analytical tools, and learning how to communicate with audible words and written words. I create a role for the students in their own writing in order to give them

greater ownership of their learning process but also in order to break the "factory" cycle of "paper in" and "grade out." Whether the assignment is a simple summary exercise, a document analysis, a book review, a historiographical essay, or a short research paper, the process of digesting—synthesis and analysis—the material and presenting it develops both knowledge of history (the content) and the skill of writing. At some point, however, students need my formal feedback, and I actually have to read and comment on the papers.

I become the WTS "tutor" again. Occasionally, I have one-on-one meetings with my students, but it can be difficult to fit in 150 students 2-5 times a semester. Consequently, I try to group the paper concerns into "class" issues and individual issues. Class issues, I address during part of a session, while individual issues are noted in my comments on the various student papers. For both, I can point to my writing guidelines in which I detail certain requirements or certain pitfalls, but often, I take part of a class and point out "common organizational" problems, such as lack of a plan, no clear thesis, or lack of parallel development (or lack of development) for the argument. For example, a common mistake for the geography and culture assignment mentioned above is greater emphasis on Egypt and little comparison to Mesopotamia which usually indicates that the students do not understand what common elements they are comparing or contrasting. Another example might by an essay in which the thesis revolves around the military prowess of Napoleon, but then merely describes three battles without any indication of how these battles prove Napoleon's prowess.

Individually, students have my marginal comments and a summation at the end of the paper. I try to mark only the first page for "sentence-level" concerns such as

grammar, misspellings, and punctuations. I sometimes require students in upper level classes to purchase a writing handbook or at least provide them with a list of recommended handbooks. Again, my writing guidelines provide some basic grammar blunders and often I write "proofread" on my student papers. For example, I might suggest to them that it is not a good idea to misspell the name of the key historical character or author five different ways. The macro-level concerns such as transitions between paragraphs, paragraphing, clarifying topic sentences, the thesis, awkward use of quotes, lack of citations, or no clear plan are noted with shorthand labels and then discussed briefly in class. On the occasion that revisions are required, I try to write a summation that can direct the student in their revisions in order that they not assume that the "new" version is merely a better-edited draft rather than potentially a completely re-thought piece.

In conclusion, it was easier when I was a tutor; there were fewer demands on my time, and fewer challenges to face, but I like where I am now—a professor of history. I know that my experiences as a tutor (and as a student) put me in the very position, I want to be. I teach! A wise mentor once told me that I could improve my writing by reading more in my field, by writing in my field, and by becoming a more critical reader of my own work as well as the works of others. I pass this advice on to my students whether they are history majors or not. I remind them that we write, we read, we discuss because for intellectual pursuits, for increasing our knowledge, for life long learning ----Writing is like breathing!!!